

Pokemon Case Study

poehlkers

from <<http://w3.salemstate.edu/~poehlkers/Emerson/Pokemon.html>>

Introduction.

The following paper traces the movement of the "Pokemon" phenomenon from its origins in the Japanese market to its introduction into the United States and beyond. It begins by discussing the basic features of the phenomenon in Japan, briefly discusses the importation of Pokemon-associated goods into the United States, and then describes the process of introduction into the U.S. Central to the latter discussion are the adaptations deemed necessary for the product to be successful in the U.S.

This paper was written for a course in consumer behavior taught in the Global Marketing Communication and Advertising program at Emerson College in Fall 1999.

The Pokemon phenomenon in Japan.

The Game Boy game.

Pokemon began as a Game Boy game, "Pocket Monsters," developed by Satoshi Tajiri and his company [Game Freak, Inc.](#) Tsunekazu Ishihara's game design studio, "Creatures," provided the visuals and early investment support. It reportedly took six years to develop; it was released in Japan in February 1996. Tajiri is generally regarded as the "author" of the game, while Ishihara is regarded as the business genius.

(Pokemon is a contraction of Pocket Monsters, or Po-ket-to Mo-n-su-taa if transliterated. In Japanese, a language based on syllables, it is common to refer to things using only the first syllables of their name, e.g., "television" becomes "te-re-bi". Because "mono" (often contracted to "mon") means "things," "Pokemon" also has the fortunate connotation of "Poke-stuff.")

The game falls into the Role-Playing Game (RPG) genre. In the game one's character wanders through a landscape populated by creatures, the "Pocket Monsters" of the title. There are multiple goals in the game. One is to collect all the possible varieties of pokemon in the land (151 in all); another is train one's pokemon in battle in order to defeat a series of elite trainers with advanced pokemon; finally, in order to get to the elite trainers one has to finish a complete circuit of the game's geography, solving small puzzles and defeating minor trainers along the way. The game was originally sold in two versions, "red" and "green," each of which was missing a set number of the total pokemon. The only way to collect them all was to trade with a player with the other colored cartridge; this could be done through the means of a "Game Link Cable" (sold separately).

Tajiri describes the game as flowing from his childhood experiences collecting insects. Others have remarked on its similarity to the capture and training of Asian crickets to fight each other.

The game itself anticipates its status as a commercial cultural phenomenon. When one enters homes in the game, shelves are lined with "Books about Pokemon." When one enters item shops, shelves are lined with "Pokemon Goods." The collecting that is done in the game directly

mirrors the collecting done by the child consumers in response to the game.

Nintendo, which is part owner of Game Freak, was not enthusiastic about the game initially. Indeed, in the very early stages of its release the game was not a hit. Nevertheless, its popularity built through word of mouth. (Pokemon Bujinesu Kenkyukai, 1999).

The serialized comic.

As part of its promotion of new video games, Nintendo has an arrangement with the children's publisher, [Shogakukan](#), to run comics based on its games in the boy oriented comic magazine, Koro-Koro Comics. (It is estimated that one out of four children in Japan read the 800+ page Koro-Koro). For example, Koro-Koro currently runs black and white comics based on Mario, Kirby, Bomberman, and Donkey Kong, all popular Nintendo characters. Koro-Koro also serves as an information guide to new Nintendo games as well as goods based on Nintendo characters. (Pokemon Bujinesu Kenkyukai, 1999)

Pokemon was developed as an humorous adventure serial for Koro-Koro starring the game's hero, Satoshi, his loyal "electric mouse" pokemon, Pikachu, and the sarcastic comic foil pokemon, Pippi (Clefairy in the English version) in their battles against the "Rokettodan" (Team Rocket in the English version). Koro-Koro also ran periodic four-panel comic strips based on the attributes of the various pokemon. Over time, different Pokemon comics, with different story lines and characterizations were run in comic magazines appealing to other groups, including younger children and girls. One of these series, written by Toshihiro Ono, has been translated into English and published in North America by Shogakukan's American subsidiary, [Viz Communications](#), the leading publisher of English-language adaptations of Japanese comics. (For anyone interested in the retail world of Anime and Manga (AM) see Viz marketing guru, [Oliver Chin's](#) columns.)

The animated television show.

Shogakukan also produces children's television and videos. Given their relationship with Nintendo, the publisher approached Tajiri to ask him if they could produce a television show based on the game. Tajiri was reportedly hesitant, fearing that a poor quality television show could harm the success of the game itself. (Pokemon Bujinesu Kenkyukai, 1999) Writers were forced to play the game extensively before beginning work on the show so that the experiences of both were compatible. The program, shown on the [TV Tokyo](#) network, became extremely popular. This lifted sales of the game. A later version of the game, Pokemon Yellow, was developed that conformed more closely to the images, characters, and story lines of the television show.

Shogakukan has also produced annual feature films based on the television show. Spin-offs from the television show and the films include theme music CDs and video tapes.

The trading card game.

The trading card game was developed by Pokemon's co-creator, Tsunekazu Ishihara and his company, Creatures. It features the collecting and trading aspects of the Game Boy game as well as the competitive battles between Pokemon. Following the logic of such games as "Magic: The Gathering," (only recently introduced into the Japanese market) players must buy basic starter

sets and then buy booster packs to improve the competitive quality of their decks. Special powerful cards are deliberately kept scarce---only one per a pack of ten cards. Periodically, new series are introduced. The card game has been so successful that a Game Boy game has been developed based on it; predictably, trading card game cards based on the Pokemon Trading Card Game Game Boy game have also been released.

Licensed goods.

Nintendo owns the licensing rights to the game and its characters. In Japan, it has licensed thousands of different products, from Pokemon Curry to All Nippon Airways jets covered with Pokemon characters.

The Pokemon phenomenon in Asia.

East Asia, particularly Taiwan, is a major consumer of Japanese popular culture. The introduction of Pokemon into these markets was relatively quick and required less cultural adaptation than in the U.S. given both the popularity of Japanese culture itself and its relative similarity to these societies.

The Pokemon phenomenon between the US and Japan.

The Japanese version of the Game Boy game(s) and videos of the Japanese Pokemon show were available in the United States long before their official introduction. Two channels in particular dominated. The first was interpersonal--people with links to Japan would bring Pokemon goods back with them from trips to Japan or get them from friends and relatives living in Japan. To maintain one's involvement in the Pokemon phenomenon was a goal of many children from Japan whose parents had brought them to live temporarily in the U.S. The second channel was the distribution of Pokemon goods through Japanese/Asian markets in the United States. The cartridges themselves are labeled "not for use or sale outside of Japan" creating minor black markets in their trade. Increasingly, the use of PC-based Game Boy emulators has allowed the distribution of pirated versions over the internet. Other Pokemon goods, such as trading card game booster packs or plush toys were available to different degrees in Japanese markets.

Pokemon goods from Hong Kong and Taiwan have also been regularly imported and sold in such places as Chinatown and software retailers, such as Electronics Boutique. There is also a growing channel of Japanese/Asian pop culture outlets such as Anime Crash. [Anime Crash, for various reasons did not obtain Japanese Pokemon-based toys until close to the official introduction; what was available were the Tomy and Bandai toys produced for the Taiwanese/Hong Kong markets]. There is some tension between retailers connected with the sale of licensed imports given that the licensee for the equivalent product may be different in the U.S. For example, Bandai sells Pokemon plush toys in Japan and Asia while Hasbro has the license in the rest of the world. There is a greater general problem, however, with pirated, unlicensed imports.

The import space between the U.S. and Japan is the leading edge of diffusion and a kind of laboratory useful for testing the prospect of a successful adaptation and introduction. Here I have a personal example in respect to Pokemon trading card game cards. My eight-year old son and I discovered them at local Japanese gift shop in Brookline for \$4 a pack six months before

they were officially introduced to the U.S. My son brought some to school and immediately attracted a crowd. Noone knew anything about Pokemon at this point; nevertheless, the cards and their images themselves were attractive. Norman Grossfeld, the head of 4Kids Productions, tells a similar story about his confidence in the success of the American Pokemon TV series after observing his seven-year-old son watch with rapt attention the original series in Japanese. (Roberts, 1999 March 16).

The Pokemon phenomenon in North America.

Adaptation issues.

General attitude.

The recent history of Japanese to U.S. introductions has revealed a shift in philosophies. Japanese hits were thought to be difficult to sell in the U.S. but the blockbuster success of The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and Tamagotchi virtual pets (sold in North America by Bandai) changed that. Many potential licensors missed out on the Power Rangers phenomenon, believing that the TV program was not sophisticated enough for American tastes. Now there is increased awareness of Japan as a source of creativity. (Pereira, 1999 April 15).

Even so, there was initial skepticism on the part of many involved in the introduction of Pokemon, including Gail Tilden of Nintendo America: Even though everyone acknowledged that Pokemon was a "brilliant game design, we did not know how much of a mass market it would be." (Baylis, 1999 August 29). This doubt seems to be based on a general fear about cultural differences (Lee, 1998 August 28; Dominguez, 1999 March 10).). In respect to the television program, Grossfeld reportedly had some doubts given the failure of the Japanese show Sailor Moon (heavily edited) in the American market. (McFarland, April 11).

It is routine for video games first developed and introduced in the Japanese and Asian markets to eventually enter the American market. Because Pokemon was not merely a video game but a "cultural phenomenon," its introduction needed to be planned extremely carefully. Major decisions about the phenomenon's introduction were made as early as 1997. Concrete plans developed in the early months of 1998. For example, the vice editor and head of the Character Planning Department of Koro Koro Comics visited the U.S. several times to arrange the broadcast of Pokemon and to ensure that the terms of the contract with the American producers were being adhered to. He made sure, for example, that the translation and interpretation of the scenario correctly conveyed the Pokemon worldview. He also dealt with the issues of: how to translate the names of the 151 different pokemon types into English, choosing the voice actors, and the promotion of game-related products.

The authors of Pokemon no Himitsu (Pokemon Bujinesu Kenkyukai, 1999) suggest that the producers believed that "cuteness" would be more difficult to use as a selling point in the U.S. and that an emphasis on the "coolness" of certain pokemon would be important. Thus the cat-like character, Nyasu, (Meowth in the English version) was predicted to rival Pikachu in popularity. As Pikachu was expected to be the key global character it was the only pokemon out of 151 whose name would be maintained in all markets. All others would be translated, if

necessary.

One aspect that did make the introduction easier was the fact that most of the goods in question (particularly plush toys) did not need major redesigns for the new markets. (Gellene, December 10).

The Products.

Game Boy game.

There are several issues that emerged that influenced the decision to adapt Pokemon to the American market.

1. Video game genres. Sports games and action oriented games more popular than role-playing games. Baylis (1999 August 29).
2. Game boy quality. "In a category driven by speed and lifelike graphics, Pokemon, a black and white game for the technologically obsolete Game Boy system didn't measure up." (Gellene, December 10).
3. Action too mild. "Many gaming industry observers considered Pokemon too mild for young American gamers, with their fondness for realistic video combat." (Gellene, December 10).
4. Similarity to previous toy crazes. Nintendo says two toy fads paved the way for Pokemon--the Tamagotchi pet from Bandai America and Ty Inc's Beanie Babies (George Harrison, Nintendo's marketing VP: Children "being familiar with those crazes helped" (Gellene, December 10).

The enormous popularity of the game in Japan provided some confidence on the part of Nintendo America that the game would sell in the U.S. Indeed, according to most observers, the marketing involved in the introduction of the game was extremely aggressive. Nevertheless, the fact that role playing games, particularly for the Game Boy, have not sold as well in the U.S. as in Japan was a cause for concern.

The popularity of role playing games in Japan is a bit curious, given the origin of the genre in the Dungeons & Dragons role playing games developed in the United States during the 1970s. They tend to involve a cast of characters with differing abilities set on a series of adventures with periodic battle encounters that increase the characters' levels; typically, the games have a vaguely medieval European setting. Japan has been the primary producer of role playing video games for many years. Some, such as Squaresoft's Final Fantasy series, feature enormously complex plots and sophisticated story lines. Translating these games to English may be part of the problem: the Japanese writing system conveys information more efficiently than English; each line of Japanese text may require two lines of English. Given the structural limitations on memory for game cartridges and CD-Roms, the plots and stories in the games become less rich because the translation is typically half as long as the original.

The most important adaptation that was necessary to make involved the renaming of each of the 151 pokemon and the human game characters. If Pokemon in general is a brand, each of the 151 individual pokemon are sub-brands with the power to sell on their own. Of the 151, only a few

(most notably Pikachu) kept the Japanese name. The main character's name was changed from "Satoshi" to "Ash," his rival's name from "Shigeru" to "Gary."

The adaptation of the game plot avoided the usual problem with English translations and maintained its richness. The game was not a straight translation, however, as incidental bits of dialogue had to be changed when they were too linguistically or culturally bound (pun-making in particular is difficult to translate). One significant change in the game itself was the elimination of a "hidden" 151st character than children could make appear by following certain, closely guarded directions; this character does not appear in the American version.

The packaging of the game itself, however, was markedly different. The original title printed on the game cartridge and box was "Pocket Monsters." As this name has potentially salacious connotations in English, the abbreviated "Pokemon" was used as the general name. This was not a perfect solution as it took a long time for people to agree on the correct pronunciation (many early press releases and news stories provided inconsistent pronunciation keys). In the graphic, the use of the lower case "e" made it apparent that it was not silent, but should be pronounced (whether it should be pronounced "uh" or "eh" or "ee" was not clear, however.)

The original Japanese games came in two versions, "Red" and "Green." The American versions came in "Red" and "Blue" varieties. This appears to be due to the more common use of these colors in the U.S. to represent opposition and the perception that blue is a more popular color than green. The graphics on the American boxes are more dynamic than the Japanese boxes.

TV Show.

Typical adaptations of an animated cartoon to a new cultural context involve translation and some degree of cultural adaptation. 4Kids Productions attempted to maximize the level of cultural adaptation. Norman Grossfeld has been quoted saying "we looked at Pokemon and said, let's make this an American show for American kids." (National Public Radio, 1999 March 6).

In the case of Pokemon, the following adjustments were made (Levin, 1998 June 11; National Public Radio, 1999 March 6):

1) Translation

There are typically two separate stages of translation. First, there is a literal translation of the Japanese into English. Second, there is a re-working of the literal translation so that it is effective in English: the story is made to flow and the humor is made more appropriate. (Solomon 1999 October 2)

a) Narration and dialogue need to be translated and rewritten. Dialogue is particularly problematic. It is in the dialogue that most of the cultural references and puns occur. There is an additional technical issue involving "lip flap." The words spoken need to correspond to the movement of the characters' mouths. New voice actors need to be hired and new voice direction becomes necessary.

b) Each "Pokemon" has its own sound, even though in all but one case, the sound is simply the way it says its name. Because the Japanese name is different from the English name in most

cases, these utterances need to be reworked.

c) To give the show a non-Japanese specific appearance, Japanese characters on street signs, storefronts, business cards are painted out frame by frame and replaced digitally with English words and graphic symbols.(Solomon 1999 October 2).

2) Omission of Japanese references

a) Humor is notoriously difficult to convey cross-culturally. Thus jokes, particularly puns, are changed to relate to American words and topics.

b) When the food the characters eat is considered too Japanese specific, (sushi, e.g.) more generic American food may be literally painted in, frame by frame. More commonly, reference is made to an American food, while the appearance of the food is not changed. For example, when the characters eat rice balls (onigiri) they remark about the delicious taste of their donuts.

c) When the appearance of Japanese style architecture is obvious and unavoidable, reference is made to such things as "Japanese restaurants" or "karate studios."

3) Faster-paced editing. It is perceived that American children have shorter attention spans than Japanese children.

4) New music score.

a) New theme songs. The theme music for the American show has more of an R&B flavor (flavor only) than the Japanese program. The first season included a "Poke Rap" which challenged children to recite all 150 Pokemon. The second season of the show added a "Pokemon Jukebox" section at the end of each episode that featured a variety of R&B flavored songs starring some of the show's characters. These songs were collected for a CD titled, "2 B A Master."

b) Incidental music. This is a major perceived cultural difference that impacts many anime adaptations. Western audiences apparently expect music all the way through a cartoon program while Japanese audiences accept long periods of silence. (Solomon 1999 October 2)

5) Content

In general, the episodes are left intact in respect to their story lines. There is reportedly some minor editing for incidental violence, such as when human characters "slap or smack one another." (Solomon 1999 October 2)

Some cultural differences, however, have led to some episodes being left out of the American series altogether. For example, episode 18, which features Ash's Mother competing in a swimsuit competition, was apparently not adapted because of issues over the scanty dress of some of the characters; episode 35, which features Ash teaming up with a Safari warden against the ubiquitous Team Rocket, was apparently not adapted because the Warden uses a gun to threaten human characters (Axelrod, n.d.)

The decision to Americanize the TV show carries with it a number of ironies. First, despite the

adaptation of the show described above, various aspects of the show including plot lines and relationships between characters can be easily read as Japanese. A column in the New York Times (Strom, 1999 November 7) argued that, in fact, Pokemon served to teach American children such traditional Japanese values as empathy and perseverance at all costs. Second, the Japanese origin of the program, for many children, is not a negative but in fact an important part of the show/phenomenon's attractiveness. Japan is well-known by young video game players (particularly those tied into the internet) to be the source of most significant video game innovations; anime is also gradually building an image as "cutting-edge" entertainment. The show, therefore, is used by some to gain knowledge of Japanese culture and access to the cutting edge. Finally, the style of the animation itself is a symptom of its Japanese origins, very limited if viewed in comparison to most American animation, relying more on special effects and dynamic still images than on smooth movements between frames. Many critics of the show in the U.S. press have commented on the "poor quality" of the show's animation; for those used to the Japanese animation style, the perceived quality of the show is actually quite high.

The Promotion.

Unlike Japan, where the marketing of Pokemon emerged over time, in the U.S., Nintendo could market the game with full knowledge of the Japanese experience and make use of what had been learned. Thus it was clear that what was to be marketed was not the game per se but "the phenomenon." This involves the principle of "synergy," or "media mix" in which a single property, in this case the Pokemon "universe" including the human characters and the 151+ "pocket monster" characters, the narrative and geography, all become part of a single package with multiple spin offs that build on each other. Careful licensing, bolstered by involving narratives (the game, TV show, and movies) becomes the key means of maintaining the phenomenon. In the Japanese case, the animated program was first shown a year and a half after the introduction of the game. In the North American case, however, the animated program became the keystone of the larger marketing strategy. It was introduced first, and then the game (ultimately, according to Nintendo (Baylis, 1999 August 29), the video games turned out to be the lead product after all). But the two built upon each other--the basic elements of the game provided a structure for the show's narrative, while the show provided a richer context for the experience of the game and provided clues and advice throughout about success in the game.

This synergistic strategy, it is important to note, is a common target of critics of children's marketing. The usual criticism is that particular programs are nothing but 30 minute commercials for other products. This is an ethical issue that should not be ignored, given hopes for quality in children's programming. Nevertheless, it misses the synergistic point that all the components are part of a much larger cultural phenomenon coordinated by marketing (but not controlled by it: the products themselves are usually the key to success).

[4Kids Entertainment](#) has long handled product licenses for Nintendo in the United States and thus handled Pokemon as well. It owns world licensing rights, excluding Asia (which Nintendo handles directly). Its subsidiaries include: The Summit Media Group, Leisure Concepts Incorporated, and 4Kids Productions. 4Kids Productions bought and edited the show from Shogakukan. Leisure Concepts is the licensor for Nintendo generally. The Summit Media Group is the syndicator. Al Kahn is the CEO of 4Kids Entertainment. Norman Grossfeld runs 4Kids

Productions.

On December 30, 1997, 4Kids Entertainment announced that the show would be marketed at the January [National Association of Television Program Executives](#) convention in New Orleans (the largest and most comprehensive program marketplace) by Summit Media. (USA TODAY, 1997, December).

Later reports indicate that the Summit Media Group was not as successful as they hoped in selling the show. This lack of success was reportedly related to the Japanese origins of the program. Gellene (December 10), for example, writes that "Local broadcasters were skeptical of a series about an unfamiliar character that could strike out with kids--like Bandai America's 'Sailor Moon' show and toys did a few years ago."

Reportedly Nintendo of America was able to convince many stations to carry the show by promising a total of \$5 million in advertising to them (Gellene, December 10). In many cases, nevertheless, the station would give the show an undesirable timeslot, presenting it at 6 or 6:30 a.m. The same coolness met Summit when it was trying to sell the show to international broadcasters at the [MIPTV](#) convention in April. (Dinoff, 1999 January 1) Regardless of the actual problem, 4Kids announced the syndication offer as successful. News stories were run announcing successful syndication deals in the Boston Globe (Saunders, 1998, February 16) and the Hartford Courant (Keveney, March 1). It was able to reach 85-90% of television households in the United States.

Some of the skepticism was based on some of the issues discussed previously. A large part of the of the problem, however, rested on a crisis that emerged when 4Kids was just beginning to pull its marketing strategy together.

The Crisis.

On Tuesday, December 16, 1997, children throughout Japan reported feeling sick while watching an episode of Pokemon. At least 730 were taken to the hospital; an additional 100 were affected by seeing the scene on the news; a school survey reported over 7000 reported feeling sick. (Some news stories [WuDunn] place the number affected at up to 12,000). Specific complaints included feeling ill, eye irritation, loss of vision, seizures, trancelike state, shortness of breath, and vomiting blood. The cause was later determined to be photosensitive epilepsy (Carroll, 1999 June 11) a relatively common reaction to flashing lights and rapidly changing colors that also affects some video game players. In one scene, some 20 minutes into the episode, Pikachu's eyes flash for five seconds during a battle; according to one source (Saunders, 1998 February 16) the problem was that the "red and blue flashes...were inadvertently synchronized with the refresh rate."

Within Japan, this incident was met with a number of actions, on the part of various actors, some concerned with public safety, others with public relations crisis management.

1. TV Tokyo pulled the show for an indefinite period (it returned the following April) and apologized, suggesting it might compensate affected viewers.
2. Culture Convenience Club, a video rental chain, pulled the videos of the show off its shelves.

3. The Telecommunications Ministry launched a probe.

4. The program producer, Takemoto Mori, made a statement explaining that that effect had been used many times before: "During editing, that particular portion didn't call my attention or bother me...I'm really sorry that the kids got sick watching their favorite cartoon." (Kennedy, 1997 December 18).

5) Japanese broadcasters agreed to set up voluntary guidelines to help shield children from flash attacks. (WuDunn, 1997 December 20)

Nevertheless, Nintendo stock went into a nosedive. (Zerbisias, 1997 December 21)

Outside of Japan, the story was run in newspapers for a week following the incident. Because Pokemon was not yet known, the story served as a more general cautionary tale about the dangers of using the television as a babysitter and as a kind of uniquely Japanese incident that couldn't happen in the United States.

One of the questions that emerges in such a situation is whether or not the public awareness produced by the incident is of any use in the promotion of the product. It is not clear whether the American partners attempted intentionally to use the incident as a jumping off point; it is more likely it was more concerned with protecting its investment. Nevertheless, news stories about the incident made it clear that this kind of incident would be unlikely in the U.S because of particular patterns of television watching in Japan. Also benefiting possible promotion is the fact that news stories about the incident typically made reference to the phenomenon in Japan and its planned introduction in the U.S. in the fall of 1998. For example, Kennedy (1997, December 18) wrote, "Nearly 600 children...were rushed to emergency rooms...after watching 'Pokemon' or 'Pocket Monsters' a TV cartoon based on characters in a hand-held Game Boy game by Nintendo... The Nintendo game the show is based on has sold a record 7 million copies and is expected to be released in the US in late 1998."

Regardless, initial awareness of Pokemon among the public and journalists was framed in a negative way. Thus among the important public relations tasks early on was damage control. Indeed, the general news frame for the later announcements about licensing efforts and the like was the incident. For example, the USA TODAY story (1997, December 31) about the introduction of the show lead: "Pokemon, the flashing, frenetic cartoon that triggered convulsions and vomiting in hundreds of Japanese children, may air in the USA next fall." This was maintained in later announcements, e.g., Saunders (1998, February 16): "The latest and most infamous toy and television craze sweeping Japan, 'Pokemon' the 'convulsion cartoon' that sickened hundreds of Japanese children, will hit the United States this fall" and Keveney (1998, March 1). "Coming this fall to a TV set near you--the show that felled several hundred kids." TV Guide apparently referred to the episode as "Dangerous TV." (Keveney, 1998, March 1).

Initial announcements, therefore, made the following points clear:

1) The American series would not include the entire episode in question (and has not until this day).

2) The American series would be edited (as was also done in Japan) to edit any cases of the kind

of flashing that caused the seizures. This was portrayed as a simple technical issue.

3) It was suggested that it was the specific behavior of Japanese viewers that caused the problem: that Japanese televisions tend to be brighter and children watch them while closer to the set and tend to pay closer attention to what is going on. American children don't watch television that way. (Saunders, 1998 February 16).

Al Kahn, CEO of 4 Kids Entertainment, took the lead in disseminating this message about safety. The incident remained the primary frame in news stories about Pokemon until September 1998 when the phenomenal success of the television show and video game became the focus.

There was some lingering damage, however, to the image of Japanese animation generally. Since its development as a niche market in the U.S., distributors of "anime" videos have spent a great deal of time defending their product, generally triggered by news stories commenting on the high violence levels and/or graphic sexual content in some videos. Because animation is generally thought to be a children's medium in the United States, these content issues become important. In many of the news stories about the incident (most notably USA TODAY's story), anime's status as a "dangerous" form to begin with was stressed.

Licensing.

Generally speaking, licensing can be a tricky process when moving a product (or in this case a "cultural phenomenon") from a successful market to a new one. According to Susan Eisner, VP of licensing at Leisure Concepts Inc. (LCI), the success of the Pokemon licensing effort has been due to the ratings success of the show. Because of the long lead time (often 18 months to two years) for the development of product, licensors want to be sure the program will be on for more than a year. The issue is that the television show is the major source of brand awareness. If the indicators are good, then you can sign long term licenses not only for core products but also for ancillary product lines. By November, 1998, LCI knew that Pokemon would be on for a second season. It was not enough to count on the success of the Japanese show (Ashdown, 1999a June).

There are also some important cultural issues to be considered, some aesthetic (French consumers, for example, prefer logos on clothing to be subtle), some religious (Babe the pig was difficult to market in Muslim countries), and some associated with an attraction to licensed products in general (licensed food and candy categories sell better in Europe). (Ashdown, 1999b June). Clearly there are some food categories, Pokemon furikake (fish flakes) for example, that were very successful in Japan as licensed products that would not sell in the U.S.

The number of licensees for Pokemon grew slowly at first (Nintendo had some limited success finding licensees at the June 1998 New York Licensing Show) but then accelerated once the program was considered a hit in the U.S. The first major licensee was Hasbro, Inc. On May 27, 1998, Hasbro announced that it had obtained rights (outside of Asia) from Nintendo to make and market toys based on Pokemon (Pokemon stuffed animals, action figures, plastic balls, and other toys...) Hasbro reportedly beat out six or seven other major toymakers for the rights. Hasbro & Nintendo were expected to devote millions to promote it. Alan Hassenfeld, Chairman and CE of Hasbro was apparently swayed by Pokemon's Japanese success: "Pokemon's phenomenal success in Japan demonstrates the power of this brand...We are incredibly excited to bring a wide range of Pokemon products to the rest of the world." (Clark, 1998 June 1) Hasbro became the "master

toy licensee" with rights for all "plush action figures, collectibles, and non-video games." (Dinoff), and thus an important partner in the development of the cultural phenomenon.

As of this writing (December 1999), the number of licensees is over 100, with over 1000 specific licensed products. The following is a sample of some categories (with some licensees identified):

- Action figures (Hasbro)
- Bean-filled pokemon (Play-By-Play Toys & Novelties Inc.)
- Comic books (Viz Communications, Inc.)
- Trading card game cards (Wizards of the Coast)
- Active wear and apparel for boys and girls. (Monterey Canyon)
- Pocket Pikachu (Tiger Electronics)
- Fuzzy dolls (Hasbro)
- Lunch pails
- Snack foods
- Halloween costumes.
- Home video rights (Pioneer video)
- Party products and stickers (American Greetings)
- Stamp sets
- Microplay sets (Hasbro)
- Sleepwear
- Key chains (Play-By-Play Toys & Novelties Inc.)
- Sheets (Franco Manufacturing)
- Towels (Franco Manufacturing)
- T-shirts
- Backpacks,
- Umbrellas
- Lunchables (Oscar Meyer)
- Trading cards (Topps)
- Lollipops (Topps)
- Coloring, activity, story books (Golden Books Family Entertainment)
- Chapter books (Scholastic)
- Show's soundtrack 2BA Master, a hit (WB)
- Temporary tattoos (Play-By-Play Toys & Novelties Inc.)
-

The campaign.

Target market.

The major target for Pokemon was reportedly variously as boys 6-12 or boys 6-14. The Japanese experience indicated that girls would also be involved in the phenomenon, if not playing the video game, at least watching the television show and buying stuffed toys. (This has been borne out in experience, with such things as Pokemon ponytail holders increasingly appearing for sale). Preteen shoppers are "notoriously fickle,"(Huffstutter, 1998 September 7) increasing the degree of uncertainty involved with this campaign.

Parents become indirect targets, influenced by their children to buy Pokemon related products.

The conventional wisdom about the current generation of parents is that they are more easily swayed than parents in the past to buy their children whatever they ask for. The fact that the game is relatively nonviolent (characters don't die, they faint) increases the likelihood that parents will allow it in their homes. In fact, if one can accept the numerous news stories about parental reactions to the phenomenon as representative, there has been a mixed but generally positive reaction among parents toward Pokemon. The game is viewed by some as somewhat educational (requiring children to know their math facts, for example) and the television show is generally regarded as well done, and fostering such values as empathy and perseverance. If there are major criticisms they tend to revolve around the marketing campaign itself (its tag line "Gotta catch 'em all" is offensively transparent) and the amount of time children spend playing the game when they could be outside playing with friends, for example.

Time frame.

The normal time frame for selling a piece of Nintendo software is 12 to 16 weeks. Nintendo's plan for Pokemon was more ambitious than normal. (Lee, 1998 September 4). The timing of the release was deliberately with Christmas in mind. (Bloom, 1998 September 11). The challenge, according to some, was whether Nintendo could maintain sales beyond the holiday season. Nintendo's goal was to sustain the popularity of Pokemon for at least two to three years by carefully staggering the release of new products from Japan. Snider (1999, March 17) quotes Chris Byrne of Toy Report, saying "it has the potential to become one of those evergreen properties."

4Kids Entertainment coordinated the early stage of promotions (Jones , 1999 March 31) doing a combination of advertising and mailings to help kids understand the Pokemon concept. Acting as a kind of parallel to Koro-Koro Comics, Nintendo Power magazine (circulation 650,000 monthly) was employed as a primary means of promotion, running previews of the game and the television show as early as April, 1998. Also employed successfully was the official Pokemon website: www.pokemon.com , which provided updates on promotions, etc. beginning in August. (The website is now the most popular website in the world for children).

In late August, Nintendo of America officially announced a major promotional effort. It would spend \$25 million (\$13 from Nintendo/\$12 tied to KFC) partnered with Hasbro and KFC. KFC would start its promotion in November. The \$14 million spent by Nintendo was 2 to 3 times the normal promotional costs involved in introducing a new video game. Much of the money was spent in distributing promotional videos to families. According to [Promo News](#) , KFC planned to "outfit its 5000 stores with a fourth-quarter premium and sampling campaign tied to...Pokemon." This would take place from November 15 to January 3. Toys would include coin pouches, puzzles and tattoos. KFC would support with TV (15 & 30s) and print ads and P.O.P displays. In-store displays from Nintendo would let consumers try Pokemon on gameboy. According to Promo News, KFC was trying to "contemporize" its brand. KFC apparently approached Nintendo for the promotion. (KFC, along with Pizza Hut and Taco Bell, is part of [Tricon](#) .) The agencies involved were Creative Alliance of Louisville KY for KFC; [Waylon Co., St. Louis](#) for Nintendo.

The campaign was kicked off in Topeka, Kansas on August 27, 1998. Nintendo hired plane to fly over Topeka and drop 10 skydivers and 1000 Pikachu dolls. The mayor named the city,

"ToPikachu" for the day. 10 Special VW Beetles shaped like Pikachu set off for various cities including Seattle, Atlanta, and Boston. KFC supplied the food; Hasbro supplied the toys. (Kansas City Star, 1998, August 28). The cars would stop at designated sites (my son and I attended one such stop at a strip mall Toys R Us in Dorchester), give out toy samples and allow children to play the game and watch some of the television show. [The stops, in my opinion, were poorly publicized (only on the website), coordinated (the car failed to show on time), and attended (there were perhaps twenty-five children who stopped at the promotion)]

The Pokemon TV show debuted in the U.S. on September 9, 1998. (It premiered in Canada on September 20). The Game Boy game debuted in the U.S. on September 28, 1998.

Despite mixed reviews, the game became the fastest selling Game Boy title in the Nintendo product's 10 year history. 200,000 to 300,000 units in a life span is considered normal; there were 400,000 retail orders for Pokemon in first the two weeks and Nintendo was expecting a million to million and a half by Christmas. Electronics chains and toy stores were selling out entire Pokemon shipments on the day the games arrived; Best Buy started handing out rain checks for Pokemon in mid-November. (Gellene, 1998, December 10) By March 18, 1999 Pokemon was Nintendo's biggest seller ever (1.7 million). By June 27, it had sold more than 2.5 million cartridges. (When Pokemon Pinball was released in the spring of 1999, it sold 262,000 in 20 days, making it the fastest GB seller ever.)

The TV show was also a major hit, despite its undesirable time slot in many markets. There were a number of news stories that talked of kids getting up early (often as early as 6 a.m.) just to watch the show. It quickly became the top-rated syndicated children's program. (Gellene, 1998, December 10). By March, 1999 sales of the videos of the tv show were high on bestseller lists too.

Hasbro's success was so great it couldn't make enough toys to keep up with demand. By April, Hasbro Inc., thanks in part to Pokemon, began gaining on the industry leader Mattel. (Pereira, 1999 April 15).

The trading card game adapted and distributed by Wizards of the Coast became an especially large hit. They failed to get cards out before the end of December, 1998 so they missed most of the holiday market but still ended up selling 50 million cards by March (Kaplan, 1999 March 1) Wizards, like Hasbro, was unable to produce enough cards to meet the demand for them. A strong secondary collectors market emerged that pushed the value of certain cards to extreme heights. (Some cards are now valued in price guides at over \$150). A Front Page story in the New York Times (King, 1999 April 26) reported that a mother and her sons camped out in parking lot to beat the crowd at "Pokemon Trading Card Game Tour" at a local shopping mall. By the end of July, Wizards of the Coast was into its 10th printing, basically exhausting the available card printing factories in the United States. (Hasbro later purchased the rights to distribute the game cards).

Another hit has been the Pokemon comic book series. Evenson (1999 April 20b) quotes the manager of a comic book shop: "I've not seen this kind of interest in comics since the death of Superman in 1992." On June 1999, the Viz Pokemon comic became the first manga adaptation to be the top selling comic of the month.

By April, 1999, there was a general consensus that Pokemon was "an unprecedented phenomenon." (McFarland, April 11, 1999)

One report (Beck, 1999 May 12) suggested that Pokemon was responsible for helping toy stores at a traditionally slow time. By July, the Pokemon franchise had generated more than \$5 billion worldwide, almost matching sales for the entire US video industry in 1998. (Doran, 1999 July 22)

By September 1999, stories were already being written awaiting the next wave of Japanese pop culture imports. Magnier (1999 September 24), for example, writes: "Forget Pokemon. In Japan, the characters and card game that have taken America by storm are rapidly being pushed aside by the latest rage, known as Yugi-oh Duel Monsters. 'I have dozens of Yugi-oh cards,' says 9-year-old Sano Yuichi. 'I have Pokemon too, but these days all my friends play Yugi-oh.' "

Pokemon in the rest of the world

As was made clear earlier, the Pokemon phenomenon developed in Japan and was quickly introduced to other Asian markets, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China.

The adaptation of the various components of the phenomenon to the American market comprised, in fact, the core of the marketing strategy for the rest of the world. The fall 1998 introduction included English-speaking countries only: USA, Australia, and Canada (French language manuals were made available for the game but the game itself was not translated). The game was introduced into Latin America at the beginning of 1999 (supporting materials were in Spanish and Portuguese, but the game itself was in English). For its introduction into Europe in the fall of 1999, translations of the game were made into the various major European languages. Nevertheless, the major adaptations made for the American market, including packaging and the renaming of the 150 pokemon were maintained for all the future releases. (Spain: Hazte con todos!) With the exception of names that, for various reasons of pronunciation or connotation, needed to change, the English names are used in other markets as well. (Norway, for example, uses "Bowser" instead of "Gary" as Ash's rival.) Further research remains to be done on these and future adaptations. It is clear that some of the promotional strategies used in the U.S. have been used in Europe, including decisions about the timing of the show's release vs. the game's release. In Germany, for example, the Pikachu Volkswagen has been involved in a cross-country tour.

REFERENCES.

- Ashdown, S. (1999a, June) The care and feeding of a licensing program, *Kidscreen*, p. 63.
- Ashdown, S. (1999b, June) When in Rome...Licensing in foreign territories, *Kidscreen*, p.82.
- Associated Press. (1997, December 18). Seizure-causing show cancelled, *Toronto Star*, p. A2.
- Atlanta Constitution. (1998, January 1). Controversial Japanese show may come here, p. 6A.
- Axelrod, J. (n.d.). www.upnetwork.com/news_articles.html

- Bailer, D. (1999 June 6). Reading, writing, and Pocket Monsters, New York Times, 14CN, 1.
- Barr, C. & Matsushita, Y. (1997, October 21). Kid Stuff in Japan, Christian Science Monitor, p. 16.
- Baylis, J. (1999, August 29). Toymakers Play the Game, Create a Craze, Washington Post, H1.
- Beck, R. (1999, May 12). Early birds line up for hot toys, Atlanta Constitution, p. 2C.
- Black, B. (1999 April 18). Pokemon game tour pulls in kids at suburban mall, Chicago Sun Times, p. 4.
- Blackmore, K. (1999 September 29). 'Pokemon does what all the best games do. Engage, stimulate and keep TV at bay, The Times, p.?
- Bloom, D. (1998, September 11). Pokemon has become the rage with a cartoon, plus toys, St. Louis Post Dispatch, p. E8.
- Carroll, L. (1999 June 11). Scientists uncover key to Pokemon seizures, Chicago Sun Times, p. 50.
- Chin, O. (1999 ...). Going Global: Merchandising Manga 101, <http://www.viz.com/news/publicrelations/columns/oc/cr4.html>
- Clark, G. A. (1998, June 1). Monday memo, St Louis Post Dispatch, p. 16.
- Dinoff, D. (1999, January 1). North American Pokemon penetration imminent, Kidscreen, p. 30.
- Dominguez, R. (1999, March 10). A monster hit, Daily News, 37.
- Doran, D. (1999 July 22). Prepare for Pokemania, Toronto Sun, p. 1.
- Evenson, L. (1998, August 28). Video game migration, The San Francisco Chronicle, p.54.
- Evenson, L. (1999 April 20a). Seeing red--and blue--at schools, San Francisco Chronicle, p. B1.
- Evenson, L. (1999 April 20b). Monster bash, San Francisco Chronicle, p. B1.
- Falconer, M. (1999, March 28). At Galleria, Pokemon packs them in, Boston Globe, B6.
- Fitzgerald, J. (1999, April 16). For Pokemon card fever, a spotty quarantine, Boston Globe, A3.
- Frutkin, A. (1999, April 12). Land of the rising shows, Mediaweek, p.9
- Gellene, D. (1998, December 10). What's Pokemon? Just ask any kid, Los Angeles Times, p. C1.
- Golfen, B. (1999, April 12). Pokemon phenomenon, Arizona Republic, p. D1.
- Graham, J & Friend, T. (1997, December 18). U.S. kids safe from cartoon seizures, USA

TODAY, p. 1D.

Guido, R. (1998, September 14). Get ready for Japan's next wave: Pokemon, St. Petersburg Times, p. 17.

Hawkins, L. (1999, June 15). Golden Books wins deal with Nintendo, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Business, p. 1.

Herz, J.C. (1999 February 4). Making a fortune, one monster at a time. New York Times, p. G4

Hill, J. (1999, April 11). Pokemon phenomenon, Atlanta Constitution, 1P.

Hnatiuk, C. (1999, July 27). Counterfeiters cash in on Pokemon craze, Toronto Star, 1.

Houston Chronicle (1998, November 27). Pokemania strikes, p. 9.

Huffstutter, P.J. (1998, September 7). Heard on the beat: The pokemon blitz is coming to stores and TV near you, Los Angeles Times, p. D4.

The Independent (1997, December 17). Power flash from TV cartoon, p. 12.

Jones, V. E. (1999 March 31). Monsters of the minute, Boston Globe, F1.

Kansas City Star (1998, August 28). Pokemon Fever, p. E8.

Kaplan, D. A. (1999, March 1). It's a Pokemon planet. Newsweek, 48.

Kennedy, H. (1997, December 18). TV cartoon lights zap 700 Japanese kids, Daily News, p. 4.

Keveney, B. (1998, March 1). Japan's Pokeman heads west, Los Angeles Times, TV Times, p.7.

King, S. R. (1999 April 26). Mania for Pocket Monsters, New York Times, p. A1.

Laurence, C. (1999, April 24). Little monsters on the march, Daily Telegraph, p.21.

Lawson, M. (1997, December 20). Honey, I just killed Father Christmas, The Guardian, p. 18.

Lee, E. (1998, August 28). Pokemon: TV monsters gobble big bucks, The Atlanta Constitution, p. 01E.

Letters to the editor (1999, April 26). Seattle Times, p. B5.

Levin, G. (1998, June 11). Notorious Pokemon cartoon poised for fall, USA TODAY, p. 3D.

Li, K. (1998, August 26). Nintendo putting 25 M into Pokemon promotion. Daily News, p.26.

Lindblom, M. (1999 April 20). Kirkland School: Go away, Pokemon. Seattle Times, p. B1.

Liu, C. (1999, May 10). Pokemon is one powerful drawing card, Los Angeles Times, p. B1.

McFarland, M. (1999, April 11). Are your children nuts about little cartoon creatures from Japan?, Seattle Times, M1.

Magnier, M. (1999 September 24). Cartoon craze boils over in Japan, Los Angeles Times, A5.

Mouchard, A. (1999 April 8). Pokemonned to the max, Houston Chronicle, 4.

Moucard, A. (1999 April 8). Some Pokemon fixation is normal, but too much is another story, Houston Chronicle, 4.

Moyle, E. (1999 April 17). Pokemania sweeps the globe, Toronto Sun, p. 42.

Mullen, R. (1998, December 16). Pokemon takes hold of American children, Indianapolis Star, p. E01.

National Public Radio. (1999 March 6). Japanese cartoon and video game has seized the imaginations of many American youngsters. Lexis Nexis transcript.

Osinski, B. (1999 October 10). Pokemon power: Kid card game craze invades malls, The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, Pg. 1G

Ostrow, J. (1999 July 24). POH-kay-MAHN Japanese phenomenon tkaing the U.S. by storm, Denver Post, G5.

Penn, W. (1999, July 1). Power of pokemon spans Pacific, Daily Yomiuri, p. 14.

Pereira, J. (1998, May 27). North America braces for attack of the Pokemon, Ottawa Citizen, p. f5.

Pereira, J. (1999, April 15). Hasbro strikes back, Wall Street Journal, p. B1.

Pokemon Buijinesu Kenkyukai (1999). Pokemon no himitsu [The secrets of Pokemon]. Tokyo:Shogakukan.

Pokemon Snap. (1999 July 26). Toronto Sun, 1

Radsken, J. (1999, March 1). Monster cash, Boston Herald, 31.

Reidy, C. (1998, December 12). Watch out Furby, Boston Globe, F1.

Roberts, A. (1999 March 16). Cuddly craze, Sacramento Bee, C1.

Rosenthal, P. (1999, July 22). Hard-selling Pokemon has kids hooked, Chicago Sun-Times, 41.

Sacramento Bee. (1997, December 18). Cartoon sickens 700 kids in Japan, p. A1.

Salmon, J. L. (1999, June 7). For preteens and parents, hunt is on for Pokemon, Washington Post, B1.

Saturday Report (1999 July 24). Pokemon Fever, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Saunders, M. (1998, February 16). Subdued "convulsion cartoon" heads to US, Boston Globe, p.A1.

Schneider, R. (1999, April 22). Teen wins yellow beetle, Kansas City Star, p. 14.

Seenan, G. (1997, December 18). Laid low by light relief, p.15. The Herald, p. 15.

Snider, M. (1999, March 17) Pokemania builds as monster games spawn a hydra-headed empire, USA TODAY, 8D.

Snider, M. (1999, March 17 b) Pokemon poised to be pop culture's next phenom, USA TODAY, 1D.

Solomon, C. (1999, July 19). An animated gathering of fans in Anaheim, Los Angeles Times, F1.

Solomon, C. (1999 October 2). The Gen-P Goldmine, Los Angeles Times, Part F; Page 1

Spector, G. (1999 July 18). A '90s mom would trade in Pokemon fad for one less costly, Boston Globe, p. 2

Star Tribune. (1998, January 1). Controversial Japanese cartoon based on Nintendo game is coming to the U.S., p.10A.

Stetz, M. (1999 May 23). Pokemon captures minds, hearts at mall, San Diego Union-Tribune, B1.

Stepp, L. S. (1999 April 9). The Pokemon phenomenon, Washington Post, C4.

Stovsky, R. (1999 April 6). Pokemon: The quest for the wild. St Louis Post Dispatch, D1.

Strom, S. (1999 November 7). New York Times, 4.

Toy Expert Jim Silver discusses Pokemon (1999 July 25). Sunday Today, NBC News Transcripts.

Uebelherr, J. & Loohaus, J. (1999 May 23). Pocket monster mayhem, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Cue, P.1.

USA TODAY. (1997, December 31). Controversial Japanese cartoons coming to USA, p. 1D.

Usborne, D. (1999, Mary 5). American Times, The Independent, p. 12.

Whyment, R. (1999 July 30). Parents braced for Pokemons, The Times, p.?

Wolfe, W. (1999 April 8). The pokemon shuffle. Star Tribune, 1B.

Wolverton, B. (1999 July 13). Pokemon card craze recalls innocence of baseball card

collecting, USA TODAY, p. 15A.

WuDunn, S. (1997, December 20). After flashing causes seizures, Japan re-evaluates TV cartoons, New York Times, p. A6.

Zerbisias, A. (1997, December 21). Strobe-light TV flashes a warning to parents, Toronto Star, p.B8.